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## The Biggest Mistakes Journalists Make in Social Media

### These errors can wreak havoc on your digital identity

By Jennifer Pullinger - May 29, 2012



Congratulations! With a presence on Twitter, Facebook, Google+, Pinterest and even (gasp!) regular updates on LinkedIn, you, my friend, are indeed social media savvy. As you should be. Many like to pit "new media" versus "old media" but truth be told, they are mutually complementary.

But now that you're waist deep in status updates, it's time to take a step

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back to assess your overall strategy to avoid making sloppy, complacent and costly errors. Here, we present the biggest blunders (so far) that journalists and media orgs make in their digital dialogues. Hopefully, you won't recognize yourself as an offender of too many of them -- but if you do, admitting you have a problem is the first step to recovery.

#### 1. You promote, but don't engage.

Once you or your news organization's Facebook page or Twitter profile has developed a sizable number of fans or followers, inevitably (or hopefully) people will start leaving comments on the stories that are shared. Too often though, said Robert Quiqley, journalism professor at University of Texas at Austin and former social media editor at the *Austin American-Statesman*, journalists "just push out their content without actually interacting with anybody or using social media the way that normal people use social media. So, they are missing out on a huge opportunity to engage their audience, get sources, and get feedback on their stories."

### "You are always a journalist no matter where you are and what platform you are using."

One way to engage with audiences is to give them a peek inside your world with exclusive content or tidbits they wouldn't get elsewhere. In Richmond, Virginia, WWBT-NBC reporter Rachel DePompa tweets links to news stories alongside "Here's what I'm working on now" previews and the occasional personal post, like rooting for NHL Caps or offering her condolences on the anniversary of the Virginia Tech shooting rampage.

Similarly, Brian Shields, online news manager at KRON-TV in San Francisco, says he has been encouraging reporters to tease stories by doing 20-second video "check-ins" on social media from out in the field.

"We had a really fun one earlier this month where one of our reporters was out covering a bee swarm, and he was all suited up in the beekeeper's suit, and he got video of himself out there," said Shields. "We are really trying to be aggressive in working with technology and the smartphones and everything else that's out there in order to really engage in the social space with our viewers."

#### 2. You follow the wrong people.

Any journalist worth his or her salt should be following competitors, as well as potential sources who can offer scoops, exclusives or breaking news. For example, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg [announced](#) the acquisition of Instagram on his timeline in early April. If you weren't among his 14 million subscribers, then you were likely a step behind the competition.

Pinterest, recently named the third most popular social network, can also birth story ideas. "If you are a food writer or fashion writer and you haven't discovered Pinterest yet, you are missing the boat because it's a great place to find information, to share information, or to just experiment," said Quiqley. Take advantage of directories, like [Repinly](#) for Pinterest, to locate influencers and sources of about-to-break trends in arts, culture, branding, and the like.

For business writers, LinkedIn should be a go-to. "If you want to look up information on a business or find out who is getting promotions and that kind of thing, it's really great for that,"

mb offers

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added Quigley. "Companies and employees put a lot of information on there, so it's really great for data-mining, and it can also be good for making connections and sources."

Another easy tip is to follow who the influencers follow. Who is *Washington Post* City Hall reporter [Tim Craig](#) chatting with on Twitter? What about prolific Tweeter and Mayor of Newark, New Jersey, [Cory Booker](#)? Click through some of those conversations, and you may find some valuable new sources. On Instagram, you'll see that Gothamist.com follows a mix of 100 staff members, New York City institutions, and other movers and shakers. All are snapping pics that just might reveal new information before it hits the local or national news.

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### 3. You don't have a plan.

Whether you're looking to increase followers, drive clicks back to your website, or just get people buzzing about your work, you need to have a plan for any platform you join. A good strategy will help you avoid wasting resources or, worse, breaking your company's social media policy.

Chris O'Brien, business and technology columnist at the *San Jose Mercury News*, said his paper's policy "is like a one-page, basic 'use your head' philosophy." Don't appear to be biased if you are a beat reporter. "Keep in mind that you are representing the organization out there," he explained. Journalists should at the very least have a discussion with their employer about the goal of being on social media, he added.

O'Brien said his own paper had to re-evaluate its Facebook strategy after realizing that the time invested wasn't paying off. "Do you want to keep building Facebook pages? Do we want to keep telling journalists to spend another half an hour of your day on Facebook doing XYZ?," he explained. "Would that help us drive more people back? Or, is it fine at the end of the day that the engagement is happening there, and that's raising our brand visibility even if it's not having a major impact on our traffic? Is it good that you are getting more buzz and visibility even if you are not directly monetizing that?"

Having concrete goals, such as "increasing traffic by X percent" or "achieving Y number of new fans per month" is necessary for making the most of your online presence. So, monitor your pages and metrics regularly. If it's not measuring up or just becoming a big time-suck, it might be best to focus on more important projects.

### 4. You don't post often enough.

Facebook and Twitter might be the big boys, but people read news on LinkedIn, too. And, while Google+ might not be racking up a ton of active users, if you're on there, you should at least share something every now and then. The point is don't leave your profiles barren.

## "Click through some of Cory Booker's Twitter conversations, and you may find some valuable new sources."

"Whatever you are doing, once you get into it, be a consistent presence," advised O'Brien. "If you are going to use Twitter, decide that you are going to be on Twitter a couple of times per day or all day or whatever, but don't sort of be there one day and not there for two weeks."

So, pick a schedule: maybe three to five times daily for Facebook and 15 minutes a day where you line up all your tweets using Tweetdeck. And check back regularly to see if people have responded or shared your posts. An application like Twunfollow can give some indication of whether you are annoying your audience with irrelevant content. And, whatever you do, [don't cross-link your feeds](#). Each platform has its own needs and different audiences.

### 5. You don't copyedit.

On social media, you are your own copyeditor. "But that's a double-edged sword," said Quigley. "You've got the speed and the independence and the ability to build your own presence, but there is the danger that you can make an error." That includes everything from grammar and spelling errors to sending out bad information, like announcing someone's death prematurely, as NPR did when it aired and tweeted a report that pronounced Arizona Representative Gabrielle Giffords dead.

"I think the important thing for journalists to remember is that you are always a journalist no matter where you are and what platform you are using, so you need pay attention to things like clarifying information, feeling confident that you are putting out accurate information, and reading over your posts or your tweets two or three times before you send it," said Quigley.

### 6. You aren't personable.

So how personal or open should you get on social media?

"In the past, we would not be comfortable with journalists sharing any opinions in a public forum about their beat, but there are some lines being blurred now because we do expect journalists to be real people on social media, which is a good thing," said Quigley. "I think that more journalists should act like a normal person on social media, so that they're sharing a picture of their kids one minute and then a news story the next."

People like to follow real, authentic people in social media. "You don't necessarily follow a topic; you follow a personality," Quigley added. "So having multi dimensions to you is good, but, of course, that can get you into an area where you say something that might compromise your ability to cover something."

In these cases, let common sense and good judgment rule, said Quigley. "One thing I tell journalists on social media is tweet and post on Facebook as if you are talking to your friends -- but your boss is over your shoulder."

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